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Book Review

H.-P. Blossfeld and A. Timm (Eds): *Who Marries Whom? Educational Systems as Marriage Markets in Modern Societies*

Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003

The extent to which people marry persons with similar characteristics (i.e. homogamy) is considered to be an important indicator of the openness of societies, as it reflects the extent to which individuals cross social boundaries (see Kalmijn, 1998). In the case of socioeconomic characteristics, the tendency of people to marry homogeneously is also important from the perspective of social inequality, because the pooling of spouses' socioeconomic resources at marriage results in more or less inequality between families depending upon the extent of socioeconomic homogamy. The present study on educational homogamy therefore addresses an important topic. Its more specific focus on the role of educational systems makes the book all the more relevant considering the process of educational expansion in most Western societies. In fact, one of the main arguments (see preface, first chapter and back cover) that constitutes the background of the research presented in this book, is that educational expansion has led to a growing importance of the educational system as a marriage market, which in turn has led to rising educational homogamy across birth cohorts. As such, the editors' interest lies in 'the role of the educational system as a marriage market and to analyse the changes induced by educational expansion (p. 2)'. In addition, the role of social origin for educational homogamy is examined. Furthermore, these issues are examined cross-nationally and from a life-course perspective, which can be seen as a contribution to the existing literature as it is one of the first and most comprehensive studies to do so.

The life-course perspective means that (in most instances) longitudinal data (i.e. retrospective or panel data) covering several birth cohorts are used, allowing for an examination of trends in educational homogamy and the employment of event-history analyses to model educational (dis)similarity at first marriage as a dynamic process over the life course. The cross-national perspective is represented by presenting results from 13 country-

specific studies conducted by researchers familiar with the country under study. Such a strategy is of course not the same as a cross-national analysis on a pooled data set, but the editors note that their cross-national ambitions are rather modest; their main goal is to assess whether their findings for West Germany — the study that inspired them to set up this project — can be generalized to other countries. Overall, the study aims at contributing to our knowledge about the role of educational systems for educational homogamy in a time of educational expansion, at methodological improvement by using longitudinal data and dynamic models, and at cross-national comparisons. Given the pitfalls of cross-national research and the theoretical and methodological issues in homogamy research, the initiators have to be praised for their study even though they, just as others, do not completely succeed in avoiding all of these pitfalls as I will try to point out in the following more detailed summary and discussion of the book.

The book starts with an introductory chapter followed by 13 country-specific empirical studies and concludes with a chapter summarizing the empirical findings. The first and last chapters are written by the editors and crucial for the extent to which the book is an integrated whole. In combination, these overarching chapters give an impression of the research problem, theory, data, methods, and the main findings. As one reads the first and last chapters, the main research questions are how educational homogamy has changed over time and what the impact is of the educational system and social origin on the rate of homogeneous marriage. Because it is only loosely related to the central topic of the book, I will leave aside the role of social origin. To arrive at hypotheses, both opportunities and preferences are argued to be important for producing patterns of homogamy — as has become quite common in homogamy research. Educational homogamy is expected to increase for two (main) reasons. First, educational expansion has led to greater opportunities to meet partners with similar education, and in this respect the role of the educational system as a local marriage market is emphasized; because the group of people enrolled in school becomes more homogeneous at higher educational levels, opportunities to meet an equally educated partner increase at higher

levels. Hence, if the school functions as a local marriage market, rising educational levels should lead to increased educational homogamy. Second, homogamy is expected to increase, because of men's stronger preferences for highly educated women due to women's emancipation. Such stronger preferences are likely to increase levels of homogamy because of increased competition for highly educated women.

The arguments about educational expansion presuppose an effect of the educational system, and therefore the extent to which characteristics of the educational system affect the rate of homogamous marriage is examined as well. The examined characteristics are school enrolment, time since leaving school and time spent in school. Having completed education should have a positive effect on the rate of (homogamous) marriage because people in school are 'not ready' for marriage. As soon as school is completed the rate of homogamous marriage should increase as people 'catch up', and then decrease again because people enter increasingly heterogeneous marriage markets (e.g. work place). Finally, because of greater homogeneity at higher educational levels, a longer time spent in school is expected to lead to higher rates of homogamous marriage. As such, Blossfeld and Timm emphasize the role of opportunities and do not pay much attention to preferences when theorizing about the impact of the educational system.

The hypotheses are tested in 12 of the 13 countries. The reason that the hypotheses are not tested for Israel is the lack of appropriate data — although this may make the reader wonder why this country is included in the project. Change over time is assessed by calculating the percentages of homogamous, downward and upward marriages per birth cohort as they are observed and as they are estimated given the marginal educational distributions assuming random marriage. The theoretical rationale for distinguishing observed and estimated rates remains rather implicit though, and some prior knowledge as to the theoretical implications of this distinction is useful. The impact of the educational system is assessed by conducting event-history analyses with three destination states: homogamous, upward or downward marriage. This means that singles are followed over time and that the rate of transition to one of the destination states is modelled, with the variables relating to the educational system as (time-varying) independent variables.

Country-specific findings are insightfully summarized by means of tables in the concluding chapter. Because observed homogamy rates are found to be higher than estimated rates in most countries, the editors conclude

that preferences for equally educated partners are an important factor accounting for homogamous marriage. It is here that some prior knowledge about the theoretical interpretation of observed and estimated rates is important; the degree of homogamy that persists after controlling for random meeting chances in the population as a whole (the marginal distributions) can be accounted for by people's preferences or, although not mentioned here, meeting opportunities in local marriage markets. The increasing gap between observed and estimated rates over birth cohorts leads the editors to conclude that the educational system has become an increasingly important marriage market, as well as that preferences for highly educated women have become stronger as women's roles have changed. This goes to show that it is difficult to disentangle whether patterns in educational homogamy are due to opportunities or preferences, which is a common problem in homogamy research. The findings with respect to the impact of the educational system are found to be in line with the hypotheses in most countries and interpreted in that light.

At the end, the editors go back to the issue of social inequality, stating that the rise in educational homogamy has led to greater inequality between families. It would have been informative in this respect to have included trends in observed homogamy rates in the summary tables because these are particularly relevant for social inequality; increasing differences between observed and estimated rates do not necessarily imply that absolute homogamy levels have increased and in fact, they declined in some countries (most notably in Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and Sweden). The concluding chapter also shows that the comparative project has not completely succeeded in its cross-national aim; the summary tables lack data on some countries because it was not studied there. Reading the country-specific chapters, it appears that model specifications, whether just marriage or also cohabitation is considered, and the precise data and measurements differ between countries as well, which makes it even more difficult to make cross-national comparisons. Granted, comparability is a problem in all cross-national research and an effort has been made to increase cross-national comparability.

The first and last chapters give a general impression of the comparative project, but a rather focused one. The country-specific chapters offer a more complete picture, as they extend upon the theory presented in the overarching chapters and/or present results of additional analyses. I will not discuss all instances here, but the most interesting chapters to read in this respect are those

on Italy, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Sweden. In the case of the first two countries, the authors are faced with declining rates of educational homogamy. They explain that, due to educational expansion, the population has become more heterogeneous with respect to educational level, and if the educational distribution becomes more heterogeneous, homogamy would decline if people were to marry randomly. As such, they extend upon the overarching chapters by paying more attention to the role of meeting opportunities in the population as a whole (versus opportunities relating to *local* marriage markets) for trends in educational homogamy and the theoretical interpretation of differences between observed and estimated homogamy rates. Furthermore, according to their arguments, educational expansion may not always have led to increased homogamy, but also to declining (absolute) levels of homogamy in case heterogeneity increases.

The chapters on the Netherlands, Great Britain and Sweden are also worthwhile, because the authors apply different methods besides the one outlined in the first chapter and thereby highlight other theoretical mechanisms. In these analyses, the dependent variable is the educational level of the spouse and one of the independent variables is the respondent's education. The respective authors explain that such analyses shed more light on the role of education as a resource in the competition for highly educated partners, and that it allows for more subtle distinctions within the groups of homogamous and heterogamous marriages. As such, these analyses can be seen as complementary, with a stronger focus on the role of competition in the marriage market due to

people's preferences for highly educated spouses. Although these analyses may have the effect of confusing the reader, it also reflects the current state of homogamy research. Homogamy can be modelled in several ways and the different models are subject to discussion. Perhaps the best approach to this controversy is that the different methods address different questions and that the choice for a particular model (or models) depends upon people's theoretical interests.

All in all, the book addresses an important topic and gives insight into trends in educational homogamy and the role of the educational system for marriage timing and homogamy in modern societies. If one takes the effort to read the whole book, one has a quite complete picture of the current state of the art as to the theories and models applied in studies on educational homogamy. Insights gained from this book may well be used in future research to shed more light upon remaining issues common to cross-national and homogamy research.

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